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FRENCH NOVELS AND FRENCH LIFE.

BY ANDREW LANG.

DO FRENCH novels give a fair picture of French life? According to Madame Adam they do not. But I never knew people yet who admitted that any written account of their own life and of themselves was true. Consider the sorrows of Mr. Froude, and remember how the colonists arose up and did not call him blessed. No English traveller's account of America is admitted to be true; no American traveller's account of England. These things are written by strangers. But I never was acquainted with a literary Scotchman whose written Scotch was accepted as good Scotch by his countrymen at home. You cannot satisfy people by pictures of their manners and peculiarities. There is no novel of life at Oxford which Oxford men recognize as correct. The critics, who are also to some extent the characters, invariably say that they are misrepresented.

Thus Madame Adam may possibly overstate her case, unless she is superior to an almost universal kind of sentiment. She tells us that the laboring classes of Paris decline to see themselves as M. Zola sees them. He is, indeed, such a fantastic and romantic writer that he always exaggerates, and, probably, represents the exception as the type. It is not in nature that an honest and kindly *ouvrier* should like M. Zola's drunkards and debauchees; still one may guess that there is an element of likeness in the caricature. Now, an element of likeness, a resemblance more or less close, is all that we can hope for in any picture. Every picture will be colored by the artist in accordance with his own eyesight. M. Zola, like Turner in old age, will see things in yellow. George Sand saw them in rose. Her peasants are not absolutely true to nature, nor are the very different peasants of Balzac. It is a question of degree, of the less or more; and so it must be in all studies of human life.

These are obvious, but necessary, considerations. For the rest, to a foreigner who seeks information from Madame Adam her interesting essay seems too abstract. It is certain, as she says, that Paris draws to herself all literary France; that men are almost obliged, if they would be known, to leave their country towns; and that they do not love their country towns is very probable. Literature is their profession; their interests are in literature. They cannot, as a rule, find like-minded people in Poitiers or Tours any more than I could expect to find many of of them in Kelso or Elgin.

Again, at home their view of society is limited by class. If they are of the middle class, it is nearly as difficult for them to know the workmen as to know the *noblesse*. We all regret these gulfs, but they exist, and even in pure socialism there will inevitably be "sets," just as there are in the peerage, where, if anywhere, all are peers. The son of a notary, who can write and wishes to write, may love his kindred and their friends at home, but he cannot confine his observations to them, nor perpetually put his aunts and cousins into his novels. He must go to Paris, where there is a good deal of variety, and so, as Madame Adam says, novels are written in Paris, for Parisians, by Parisians. There is no getting out of that fatal circle, and we must remember that French novels represent life less as it is than as Parisians like to have it represented. Moreover, we must allow for the choice of situations and sentiments new rather than true, and fashionable rather than permanently human.

We must always make these deductions; but, when they are made, do French novels, on the whole, give a true picture of French life? A foreigner can only ask the question. Here it is that he finds Madame Adam's account too abstract. For example, take the broad differences between French novels on one side and English or American novels on the other side. In our fiction (by "our" I mean that of the English-speaking people) almost all the love is between bachelor and maid, and the goal is the altar. In French fiction almost all the love is between man, married or single, and the wedded wives of other men. What we wish to know is this: Does the absence of honorable love-making between the young people of French fiction correspond in any degree, and, if so, in what degree, to its absence in real life? Again, does the preponderance of lawless love in French fiction answer in any de-

gree, and, if so, in what degree, to a like preponderance in actual fact?

Naturally I am not pretending that we Anglo-Saxons are more "moral" than the French. Scandal for scandal, "appalling revelation" for "shocking disclosure," perhaps we have the worst of it. But if there is as much honorable "courting" in France as in England or America, the fact does not come out in French fiction. Perhaps the French do not find it interesting to read about; or, again, they may consider it too sacred a theme for the novelist's art. It is only plain that there is a great difference of taste between French and English novel-readers: how far that difference of taste answers to difference in life we cannot tell, and Madame Adam does not tell us.

In our own life it is obvious that, in some classes, high and low, a certain commandment is no more honored than it is in France. But we do not wish to read about intrigues in our fiction, and our difference in taste must not blind us to something very like identity in morals. Thus, just as there is plenty of intrigue in some sections of English life, though very little of it in English novels, so there may be plenty of prenuptial affection in French life, though in French novels we seldom find it sympathetically handled. But, then, if it exists in a large degree, why is it so systematically ignored? That is one of the things about which we aliens desire information.

A French critic may ask, in reply, wherefore, if we have plenty of loose living, we do not represent it in our fiction. Is it because we are prudes and hypocrites? Not altogether. We have an impression that, however much guilty passion may be abroad, it would not be diminished, but rather increased, by pictures of its indulgence. The set of public opinion is decidedly against such intrigues; and the examples of it which occur are not calculated to alter that which is decidedly the general sentiment. I do not mean to hint that the general sentiment is less honorable in France; but I do think that French novels might lead one more or less into that opinion. To that extent, then, French novels may be misleading, and, in studying them, we must allow for the influence of an old tradition and for the special taste of certain circles in Paris. Again, of course, the liberty of our girls is so great that it would be hard to keep any English novels from them. Thus our novelists, as some of them com-

plain, have the fear of the young girl before them. In France girls are held more strictly in hand, and it is understood that they only read Walter Scott. Their condition is the more gracious, but here the difference in novels does rest on a difference in social usages.

When we are asked, Do French novels represent French life? we must, of course, distinguish. Nobody supposes that French life is all baccarat, murder, duels, *horizontales*, gay breakfasts, and amateur detectives, as in M. Fortuné du Boisgobey, nor all dirt, drink, curses, and the rest, as in some naturalistic books. Nor is it all compact of parties in country houses, and escapades in the wrong bedrooms, and wit, and raillery, and riding, and shooting, as in the dialogues of Gyp. Xaintrailles is manifestly a caricature, and a caricature is the detestable minor poet in "Un Raté," and one can only hope that Eve is a good likeness. Even a foreigner can see all this plainly enough. Even a foreigner knows that all Academicians are not a set of libidinous *crétins*, as in "L' Immortel"; and it is but in human nature to behave quite like the miners in "Germinal." We do not suppose that all members of *la haute finance* are ill-mannered and corrupt, nor that all French women of fashion are akin to Madame de Flirt. The blue boudoirs of M. Paul Bourget must shelter many duchesses who are not constantly hurrying across Paris to a rendezvous. I decline to believe that many French gentlemen are so forlorn of occupation as to stand about like amateur sentries, without even a dry sentry-box, after the manner of the hero of M. Guy de Maupassant's "Notre Cœur." Paulette is plainly an exceptional little person, nor can there be so many young milliners of beauty and virtue, and high birth, as those who, in M. Xavier de Montépin's legends, are so perpetually kidnapped by miscreants.

Mr. Ruskin has written with a good deal of indignation about French fiction, and, for a moralist, Mr. Ruskin's knowledge of his theme is "extensive and peculiar." But people are not, after all, so very bad. In those endless romances of M. Xavier de Montépin, popular sympathy is always with virtue in distress. The heart of the people, the heart of all peoples, is in the right place. As to the fiction, we see that there is everywhere an immense deal of exaggeration. Engineers are not so clever as M. Ohnet's engineers; Brazilians are not so unscrupulous as M.

Boisgobey's Brazilians ; *ouvriers* are not such blackguards as M. Zola's *ouvriers* ; marchionesses are not in so coming-on a humor as the *marquises* of M. Bourget ; literary men are not so "sair beside themselves" about hateful actresses as M. Bourget's literary men ; peasants are not so sordid as almost everybody's peasants, and the whole world is not so sentimentally profligate as nearly the whole world of popular French fiction. "Every one has a sane spot somewhere in his mind," and even the seventh commandment has intervals of security and repose.

When we ask whether novels represent life, let us remember that only an infinitesimal fraction of any people reads novels, or any other literature. In France, we may be sure, there is a great worthy middle-class population which never reads. They do not know the novelists, nor the novelists them. They are unrepresented. Again, those who do read like to read about something alien to their experience. Alien to it is all that exaggerated profligacy of romance ; so alien that they no more dream of imitating it than you or I dream of imitating Tiberius, or Chaka, or the Artful Dodger. To them it is, essentially, a fairy tale, remote, unenvied, but entertaining. To be sure, if we carried this argument far, we might find ourselves maintaining that the morality of a nation is in inverse ratio to the immorality of its fiction. We border on Charles Lamb's perilous theory about the comedies of the Restoration. Still, there is a certain amount of truth in our contention.

To most readers, not to all, novels are fairy tales. Thus, allowing for exaggeration, for the taste of the capital, for the *remoteness* of fiction, for the really small number of persons who read and who are written about, we may decide that French novels in the mass do not give a truly accurate description of French society in the mass. For example, I this moment chanced to look at Miss Price's account of life in Anjou (*Longman's Magazine*, October, 1891). Now, no French novel had revealed to me that beautiful survival of the existence of the old *noblesse* at its best. Gyp's *noblesse* live very differently from Miss Price's. *Their* existence seems far too good to last, a fragile relic of what was noblest and simplest of old. Good go with it, one hopes ; but Miss Price's picture is a new and strange picture to at least one reader of French fiction.

Doubtless fiction does not represent many other noble aspects

of French existence. One regrets these omissions, and there are sins of commission too which one regrets. As far as the bulk of French fiction has any influence on young French people (old people are safe), it is seldom excellent except in so far as it is always patriotic. The republic has not killed in France that old chivalrous virtue of patriotism, nor has fiction soiled it, nor commerce nor cynicism laughed it to scorn. The flag is the flag still, be it white or be it tricolor, and I wish that the same spirit were as strong in another country.

To end, as far as a foreigner can determine, French fiction exaggerates much in French life that is evil, and omits much that is noble. Thus its picture cannot be correct; yet, on the whole, novels show what way the popular wind blows, and help a little to produce the modes of action and sentiment which they describe.

ANDREW LANG.